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ABSTRACT

While continuing education is vital to all practicing social workers, human service workers in rural areas that are undergoing rapid change due to energy development may face particular problems in obtaining additional training and education. When rural areas become boom towns and social disturbances increase, human services personnel generally experience increased caseloads and new roles and responsibilities. However, because most boom towns do not have formalized planning mechanisms, social workers find themselves without the training necessary in their new circumstances. In addition, distance, weather, narrow professional orientation, lack of federal funding, and training materials focused on urban issues can be negative incentives to further human services training. Consequently, each small town and each state should have a body responsible for planning, coordinating, and evaluating continuing education for human service workers. The planning bodies should assess needs and formal and informal resources in rapidly developing towns. The planning bodies should use all local resources available and some outside consultants (such as university personnel) to provide a full array of social services. Continuing education programs for social service workers should be based on needs assessments, should be versatile, should capitalize on advances in instructional technology, and should be carefully evaluated. (SB)

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CONTINUING EDUCATION IN AN AGE OF UNCERTAINTY: MEETING HUMAN SERVICE NEEDS IN IMPACTED COMMUNITIES

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Continuing Education in an Age of Uncertainty:
Meeting Human Service Needs in Impacted Communities

ABSTRACT

The world's energy crisis has had a number of implications for social work and other human service disciplines. Problems such as the socioeconomi consequences of inflated fuel prices on the poor and the socioeconomic consequences of energy boom towns have become increasingly documented in the literature. Professional organizations such as the National Association of Social Workers have developed policy positions on energy, and educational organizations are beginning to discuss ways of adding energy content to the curriculum.

While progress has been made in attracting professional attention and in developing curriculum content, much remains to be done. For example, most energy development occurs in rural environments where human service personnel are faced with new problems and responsibilities. Providing education and training to this group could, and probably should, be a major function of continuing education programs. Accordingly, this paper will address the needs of human service personnel in rural, energy-impacted areas; it will discuss problems and issues in planning and delivering continuing education; and it will suggest program alternatives designed to overcome obstacles and meet needs.

CONTINUING EDUCATION IN AN AGE OF UNCERTAINTY: MEETING HUMAN SERVICE NEEDS IN IMPACTED COMMUNITIES

He not busy being born is busy dying.[1]
Bob Dylan

The world's energy crisis has had a number of implications for social work and other human service disciplines. Problems such as the socioeconomic consequences of inflated fuel prices on the poor[2] and the socioeconomic consequences of energy boom towns[3] have become increasingly documented in the literature. Professional organizations such as the National Association of Social Workers have developed policy positions on energy,[4] and educational organizations are beginning to discuss ways of adding energy content to the curriculum.[5]

While progress has been made in attracting professional attention and in developing curriculum content, much remains to be done. For example, most energy development occurs in rural environments where human service personnel are faced with new problems and responsibilities. Providing education and training to this group could, and probably should, be a major function of continuing education programs. Accordingly, this paper will offer a rationale for continuing education for human service workers; it will address the needs of human service personnel in rural, energy-impacted areas; it will discuss problems and issues in planning and delivering continuing education; and it will suggest program alternatives designed to overcome obstacles and meet needs.

Continuing Education

According to Swack, "continuing education has been broadly defined as educational offerings that do not lead to an academic degree".[6] Instead,

> The goal is to develop professional skills and enhance professional competence, and this may secondarily lead to advancement on the job or to further involvement in education leading toward a degree. The basic difference between the degree programs and continuing education is that the school determines the content of the former based on what the learner needs to know for entry into practice, while the immediate learning needs of the participant generally guide the selection of courses in a program of continuing education.[7]

Faherty further operationalizes this concept by stating that a generic definition of continuing social work education includes "any planned, educationally sound experience, specifically: post-degree university courses, staff development/in-service training, self-study, peer consultation, and supervision".[8]

A variety of rationales have been provided for the continuing education of adults. Mann states that:

> Continuing education for adults provides the opportunity for adults to adjust to the social, cultural, economic, and technological changes—changes which require new skills and new knowledge if the adult is to keep up with the growth and development of the community, the state, and the nation. If we don't keep up, how do we expect others who are less fortunate than we are to do so?[9]

Knowles reinforces this line of thought.

> The education of adults is rapidly becoming a central concern, a central need of our civilization. The reason for this change is a growing realization that unless we do something fast to get adults growing and adapting and learning to live in a new kind of world, man is in danger of becoming obsolete.
> .....Technologies of work acquired in young adulthood are increasingly archaic by the time individuals have reached their 40s. But even more tragically, social attitudes, values, and relationships that are progressive in one decade are decadent in the next.[10]

Hence, adult and continuing education services are aimed at individual and societal survival.

Human service professionals share these general goals but also place a more specific emphasis on the needs of service providers. For instance, Howery claims that:

> Continuing education is fundamental to our social responsibilities and to the demands of society that we stay relevant. Relevance, at least in part, can be achieved if we look at continuing education as a process by which learning is directed in preparation for coping successfully with the hazzards and opportunities of a competitive professional existence. People want to learn and use their talents, and the need to learn persists long after they end their formal education.[11]

Walz stresses that, "As never before professional viability for the practicing social worker requires a sound plan of continuing education".[12] He notes the

magnitude of change that is ocurring and attributes it to revolutionary forces, to wit:

> Our society is at once in the midst of a cybernetic revolution, a weaponry revolution, a medical-technologic revolution, a corporate revolution, a communications revolution, a human rights revolution, and an urban revolution. The sum of these revolutions or more appropriately of their effects is the formation of a new culture.[13]

Continuing education, therefore, may become a driving force in reshaping human service professions in order to equip them for new roles and responsibilities in a rapidly changing society.

Faherty supports this argument and reasons that:

> In an age that has been labeled by various authors and social critics as "post-industrial" and "future-shocked", one consistent theme has emerged: knowledge is in a continuous state of expansion and growth. A negative consequence of this modern phenomenon of knowledge explosion is the danger of obsolescence, that decremental process comprising the loss of acquired knowledge and the nonacquisition of new knowledge.[14]

In short, there are compelling reasons to support continuing education for human service workers.

Human Service Personnel in Rural, Impacted Areas

However, while there are compelling reasons for continuing education for service providers, the provision of education and training to rural workers may present special problems. A review of the literature[15] and interviews with selected continuing educators[16] reveal a number of problem areas.

Horejsi and Deaton note the importance of distance and weather, especially in the large, sparsely-populated western states such as Montana and Wyoming.[17] Communities of several thousand people tend to be at least 100 miles from a community of similar size. Many continuing education participants must drive 100 miles to attend a workshop or other educational event. Some may travel several hundred miles. Factors of space and distance increase the time and cost of continuing education and tend to serve as a disincentive for agencies and individuals.

Western states often have extreme weather conditions which affect attendance at conferences and workshops. Hazardous driving conditions, road closures and/or the constant threat of such conditions may destroy or reduce the results of weeks of planning. On the other hand, some rural practitioners are so possessive of their "short but glorious" summers that they are reluctant to seek education and training during this time.

Low population density may have a major influence on the planning and delivering of continuing education. There generally are not enough personnel in any given discipline (e.g., rehabilitation counseling) to justify specialized instruction for that one group of people. "Turf" issues and narrow professional orientations may exacerbate these problems. Also, overemphasis on professionalism sometimes prevents interested citizens and natural helpers from attending and benefiting.

The reduction of federal funds for human service programs has resulted in numerous adverse consequences for continuing education. University and college programs tend to respond to reductions in personnel and funding by protecting their core curriculum. "Nonessentials", such as electives, demonstration projects and off-campus activities are often victims of the budget-cutting ax. Fewer faculty and fewer travel funds are available for the hinterlands. Concomitantly, agency personnel face increased caseloads as a result of staff reductions and have less time and money for education and training.

Qualified persons in the community who may be available in lieu of, or as a supplement to, university educators/trainers are sometimes few and far between. They may also represent a variety of human service disciplines. Additionally, they may have valuable knowledge and experience but are not qualified or prepared to educate or train.

A frequent, but perhaps diminishing complaint, is that too much training material is urban-oriented. Speakers, trainers, films, slides, videotapes,

cassette tapes, case records, exercises, examples and the like are from urban environments and sometimes have little relevance to the rural human service delivery system.

Service personnel in rural areas blessed (or cursed) with large energy and mineral resources tend to have the preceeding problems as well as additional ones created by large-scale development. The rapid development of such resources as coal, oil, oil shale, gas and uranium result in a phenomenon generally referred to as the "boom town", defined by the authors as:

1. A community experiencing above average economic growth,
2. which results in benefits for the community (e.g., expanded tax base, increased employment opportunities, social and cultural diversity),
3. but which also places or results in strain on existing community and societal institutions (e.g., familial, educational, political, economic).[18]

This definition, and most others, tend not to establish a specific percent in population growth since communities differ in their capacity to absorb change.

However, as a general rule of thumb, the Denver Research Institute concluded that a small town could accommodate a five percent increase in annual growth rate, that an annual growth rate of ten percent strains local service capabilities, and that a growth rate above 15 percent seems to result in breakdowns in local and regional institutions.[19] Numerous communities in the West and other regions are growing at rates in or above the danger zone.

While experts differ in determining the exact nature and causes of the energy-impacted community or boom town, there is little doubt but that service providers encounter a plethora of problems in their rapidly changing community. Mountain West, Inc., uncovered an eight-fold increase in the caseload of a mental health clinic while the population of the community doubled.[20] In another community, the Institute for Social Science Research discovered that the number of people seeking out mental health services was twice the national rate.[21]

A Denver Research Institute study found that while Craig, Colorado grew 43% from 1973-1976, it experienced the following increases in social indexes: child neglect/abuse—130%, crimes against property—222%, family disturbance—352%, substance abuse—623% and crimes against persons—900%.[22] Weisz[23] and Marshall and Boughsty[24] identified extremely high incidences of mental health problems in Gillette and Wheatland, Wyoming. Other researchers have detailed the plight of such groups as the aged,[25] women[26] and minorities.[27]

Communities experiencing such proliferation of problems frequently find their troubles compounded by the lack of formalized planning mechanisms and procedures. The old, informal system cannot accomodate the increase in agencies, organizations and services. Fragmentation of effort, duplication of some services with other needs going unmet, and a general lack of a coordinated, comprehensive human service delivery system are the results. Education and training efforts do not escape the ineffectiveness and inefficiency of this non-system. For example, two agencies may sponsor workshops on alcoholism while child abuse is neglected. Scarce resources are not utilized to maximize their impact.

Lack of careful needs assessments may mean that some educational and training needs are not identified and emphasized in programming. The dramatic increases in some obvious problem areas (e.g., alcoholism) generally attract much attention. However, less dramatic changes may be overlooked. For example, agency and organizational growth usually means that personnel assume new and different roles and responsibilities. The person who functioned well as a one-person staff may find himself/herself performing administrative/supervisory tasks for which he/she has no inclination, education or training. Job performance of the supervisor and employees may suffer as a consequence.

Rapidly increasing caseloads may make it difficult for some agencies to free workers for training even if they perceive the need. Other agencies may view such activities as a vacation and not support them regardless of time available.

Additionally, the increasing numbers of "clients on the doorsteps" generally means that workers feel an immediate need for training that will help deal with these acute, crisis cases. Preventive strategies and skills tend to be overlooked.

Increasing workloads and the rapid rate of change in the community contribute to very high stress levels for human service personnel.[28] Burn-out is common with some agencies turning over employees every six months. Experience is wasted while new workers face the most complex cases imaginable.

While no new social or behavorial disorders have been discovered in boom towns, some of the problems may be new to people whose only work experience has been in a relatively quiet, rural environment. Also, severe problems that formerely only appeared infrequently may become regular occurrences. Specialized education and training might be highly desirable.

A final problem confronting the planners of continuing education for human service personnel is choosing the people who will conduct the programs. Many entities provide continuing education, including universities and colleges, professional associations, governmental organizations, local agencies and private proprietors. While any one or a combination of these might deliver a valuable product, there are disturbing reports on the quality of some of these providers.

Complaints vary but many fall under three categories. One, the educators, trainers and consultants are not familiar with rural, western life. For example, one consultant who received a large grant to assist western communities did not know what a county supervisor was, let alone the importance of such a person in deciding what gets done, when and where. The value of such a consultant is certainly suspect. This problem is exacerbated by the large numbers of eastern professionals who cannot find employment in their region.

Another complaint is that consultants present "packaged programs" which do not take into account the individual differences of communities. The object seems to be "to get into the community, get its money and get going to the next community."

A final problem centers on non-human service professionals purporting to tell service personnel how to plan, deliver and evaluate services. While a variety of people from outside social work and other human service disciplines have knowledge which may be helpful to service workers, these workers frequently resent being told what to do by someone who has limited, if any, experience in an actual human service agency. For example, a sociologist's analysis of the social structural changes in an impacted town may be extremely helpful in better understanding the community. However, specific recommendations for community intervention would generally be better received if delivered by a service worker who had practical experience in similar areas.

Continuing Education Programming

The foregoing problems of rural and energy-impacted communities must be considered carefully if continuing education programming is to be of maximum effectiveness.[29] Many problems were associated with inadequate planning and coordinating mechanisms and efforts. Improvements are needed at local and state levels.

Each town should have a committee, council, task force, or the like, responsible for planning, coordinating and evaluating continuing education for human service workers. These may exist as separate structures or parts of existing entities. Some rural communities have versions of health and welfare planning councils. These generally lack paid staff but have elected officers and regular meetings (luncheon meetings are common). Since these organizations tend to be inclusive of most service organizations, they are likely vehicles for planning continuing education activities. An existing or new committee could assume specific responsibility for education and training.

Communities lacking some form of social planning organization would do well to consider one before energy development occurs.[30] Initial training workshops could focus on the need for and forms of such bodies. Those persons establishing this organization should develop plans for continuing education.

Efforts to better plan and coordinate human services training should also be made at higher levels. Shatz and Frey have developed eight principles that guide in the development of cooperative planning for continuing education.[31] A state level committee might include representatives from state agencies (e.g., department of public assistance, department of mental health), professional associations (e.g., National Association of Social Workers, Adult Education Association), universities and colleges (e.g., department of social work, extension) and other groups. Local and state committees should have some means of direct communication between each other. Informal contact (e.g., a county health nurse communicating with her state director) is valuable but is seldom completely adequate.

Once continuing education planning bodies are in place, they should begin with an assessment of needs and resources. Macht,[32] Olson[33] and Hawkins[34] are authors who provide insight into needs assessment in rural and impacted communities. Assessment should include training topics, preferred forms of training, time available, funding limitations and other pertinent information. Attention must be directed to areas often neglected (e.g., changing roles and responsibilities of service workers). Assessment tools such as questionnaires should be as comprehensive as possible as opposed to a series of such items. Boom town residents are typically "surveyed to death" and develop a high resistance to the endless hordes of researchers. Mayor Enzi of Gillette, Wyoming reported that the studies of his town comprised a stack over ten feet high, and Mercer, North Dakota was the victim of over two hundred studies. Coordination is urgently needed among researchers.

Resources, as well as needs, must be catalogued. Most communities have more than might be expected and the use of these counteracts the typical rural obstacles of time and distance. Local agency personnel will undoubtedly possess much knowledge. A minister might be a highly trained marriage counselor. An extension worker could have a great understanding of rural community development. A school counselor could be the expert in substance abuse. Newcomers, especially

wives, who flood into town often have an immense wealth of talent and qualifications. Involving them maximizes the use of local expertise and enhances community integration. Natural helpers should not be overlooked.[35] Rural areas tend to have many residents who are good at helping despite their lack of formal qualifications.

A number of local persons who have needed knowledge and skills may be reluctant to instruct and train if they feel uncertain about their abilities as teachers. The continuing education committee might elect to sponsor a workshop on how to lead a workshop or training session. Human service locals with workshop experience could participate in this event. Additionally, expertise could come from the local educational system. Someone with a background in adult education would be a logical choice for a workshop focusing on educating and training adults. In fact, adult and continuing educators should work in close alliance to best prepare for and deal with boom town problems.[36]

After identifying needs and resources, some outside assistance will in all probability still be warranted. Few small towns and/or rural communities would possess all required expertise. Furthermore, while the authors encourage the maximum utilization of local resources, there are times when outsiders are needed because of their detachment and objectivity.

Outside consultants should be selected with care. As a general rule, such persons should have some familiarity with rural America, especially those areas affected by rapid growth. Losing a job in an urban think tank or looking for an excuse to visit the West are not the ideal qualifications. Extreme caution should be exercised when considering non-human service consultants for educating and training human service workers. It requires more than a Ph.D. in the social services to become an expert on impact mitigation or rural service delivery. Special efforts should be made to locate persons with a rural orientation and with rural-oriented training materials. Examples from Chicago and New York seldom

"ring true" in Green River, Wyoming, Browning, Montana, or Mercer, North Dakota.

Contact between a university and boom town social service workers may be extremely productive. Gaps in local educational programming can be offset by the resource-rich university. Much assistance is sometimes available at little cost. University affiliation may also be important for those persons interested in academic credit. Schools facing enrollment declines sometimes aggressively search for students and might welcome the chance at off-campus programming. Gullerud has outlined three models for taking education from the ivory tower to the practice community, to wit: geographical, chronological and functional.[37] Advantages for the academic institution include research opportunities, field placements, sharing of knowledge and good public relations.

Schools interested in off-campus programing[38] may find that the boom town population increases to the point where a "critical mass" makes course work possible. In other words, there are enough potential recipients of educational services to justify a university presence. Brawley and associates have found that even educational institutions with quite limited resources are able to provide training for a wide range of social service personnel.[40] Some residents would opt for academic credit toward a degree, some will favor continuing education units (CEUs) and some will simply want the knowledge and skills.

Programming, whether from a university or not, should be based as much as possible on the time preferences expressed in the initial needs assessment. Evenings and weekends could be considered as well as intensive several day or week sessions. A comprehensive program would also use correspondence and other home-study means of instruction. Improvements in these instructional modes (e.g., use of cassette and videotapes, telephone contacts with instructors, circuit riding instructors) make them far more valuable than in the past.

Where possible, a university or college affiliated learning center might be a great asset.[41] Such a center could serve as a repository of instructional

equipment and material, it could give the community skilled instructors, it could serve as a field placement for students and it could serve to strengthen relationships between the academic and real world.[42]

Advances in instructional technology should be capitalized upon. Interactive computer-assisted learning and interactive satellite programming will increasingly become integral components of instructional endeavors.[43] Edwards, a leading authority on continuing education, has used interactive satellite communications to deliver content on rural rape crisis services to human service providers in thirteen Appalachian states.[44] The success of his program bodes well for future advances in this direction.

The emphasis on education and training at home or in the local community does not mean that out-of-town conferences, institutes and workshops should not be part of a comprehensive program. Many individuals will continue to benefit from such activities. However, local programming does much to overcome the usual problems of time, distance and expense.

Innovative training programs, such as the Wyoming Human Services Project of the University of Wyoming, could be expanded and modified.[45] The NIMH—funded WHSP took university students in their final year of college and prepared them for multidisciplinary human service teams in impacted communities. These teams provided direct services, assisted in community development efforts and helped develop local training sessions.

Variations might include indigenous human service workers being brought to the campus for intensive workshops. These could be patterned after similar training offered by the regional drug abuse programs. Another variation would entail indigenous personnel being given similar training but in their home communities. Such programming must be based on the best possible needs assessment and carefully evaluated.

In fact, evaluation of continuing education needs to be an on-going part of any program. Schinke, et al., have pointed out that enumerating workshop attendance and relying on inadequate evaluative procedures does not suffice for evaluating teaching effectiveness.[46] He and his colleagues developed an approach for emperically determining training impact which yields unambiguous findings on participants' conceptual knowledge, ability to recall and recognize practice skills, and satisfaction with instructional quality and relevance. Such documentation has the potential of improving education, improving practice and improving the climate for continuing education in boom towns.

Summary

In summary, this paper defined and provided a rationale for continuing education; it examined the needs of human service personnel in rural, energy-impacted areas; it focused on problems and issues in planning and delivering continuing education in such areas; and it suggested program alternatives designed to overcome barriers and obstacles.

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31. Eunice Shatz and Louise Frey, "Principles and Application of the Cooperative Model in Continuing Education", Journal of Education of Social Work, 13 (Fall, 1977), pp. 91-98.

32. Mary W. Macht and Jean Quam, "Needs Assessment in Rural Areas: Two Case Examples", a paper presented at the 4th National Institute on Social Work in Rural Areas, Laramie, Wyoming, July, 1979.

33. Judith K. Olson, "Needs Assessment and Program Evaluation in Impacted Communities", in The Boom Town: Problems and Promises in the Energy Vortex, op. cit., pp. 123-138.

34. Michael R. Hawkins, "Dynamic Needs Assessment: An Example", Ibid., pp. 139-144.

35. The importance of natural helpers in rural, energy-impacted communities is attested to in Frank W. Clark, Jon W. Bertsche and V. Edward Bates, "Informal Helping in a Rural Boom Town", Human Services in the Rural Environment, 5 (May/ June, 1980), pp. 19-24; and Judith A. Davenport and Joseph Davenport, III, "Utilizing the Social Network in Rural Communities", Social Casework, 63 (February, 1982), pp. 106-113.

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37. Ernest N. Gullerud, "From the Ivory Tower to the Practice Community: Three Approaches for Off-Campus Social Work Educational Programs", Journal of Continuing Social Work Education, 1 (Winter, 1981), pp. 9-14, 26.

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